

# Countering Backlash: A Collective Program in the Struggle Across Regions

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## Introduction

This paper gives an overview of “Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice,” a six-year engaged cross-regional research program that began in late 2019/early 2020 and is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). We will introduce how the program is organized, how we have worked, and some of the challenges we have faced as a program, as well as what we have learnt together about anti-gender backlash. This issue of Al-Raida grew out of one of our program convenings, led by the Arab Institute of Women (AiW), who are a key partner in our consortium, or collective.

When we started this collective effort at the end of 2019, there were already some discussions of a backlash in Latin America (Barrera, 2017; Biroli, 2018; Corredor, 2019; Corrales, 2019; Corrêa, 2018; Cabrera, 2020) and Europe (Kovatz & Poim, 2015; Kovats, 2018; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), and debates on the subject in US politics (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008; Piscopo, 2017; Dragiewicz, 2018), but there was little to no discussion of backlash within the broader Global South (Corrêa et al., 2018; Sardenberg et al., 2020). There was, however, some recognition that backlash movements had begun to enter international policy spaces, such as the UN, which had shifted and expanded to become a transnational movement (Corrêa et al., 2018; Goetz, 2020; Cupac & Ebeturk, 2020). It was in fact in just such a space at the time, during the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in March 2019, that IDS attended an event at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in New York organized by AiW and which led to AiW joining this program from the outset.

We brought together 12 partners (including the Institute of Development Studies - IDS) from academic and activist spaces in eight countries (Brazil, Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Lebanon, UK, Türkiye and Uganda) across five regions. The program developed its framework and strategy with these partners in a collaborative process during our inception phase. We set out with the objective “to enhance the understanding, capacities and opportunities needed for women's rights organizations and other gender justice defenders to

counter the backlash and address the erosion of gender objectives within development” (Institute of Development Studies, 2019). To achieve this, the program’s strategies focused on three areas:

1. Understanding backlash against women’s rights and gender justice.
2. Addressing the erosion of gender agendas, their co-option and its stereotyping effects.
3. Advancing new opportunities for women’s movements and rights defenders to reclaim gender justice (Institute of Development Studies, 2019).

Along with IDS in the UK, the other 11 key partners come from four sub-regions of the Global South. From East Africa, there are Advocates for Social Change – Kenya (ADSOCK) as well as the Center for Basic Research (CBR), the Refugee Law Project at Makerere University (RLP) and the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), all three in Uganda. From South Asia, partners include BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (BRAC-JPGSPH) in Bangladesh, as well as SAHAYOG NGO with the Centre for Health and Social Justice (SAHAYOG/CHSJ) and Gender at Work Consulting, both in India. From Latin America, we have the Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies of the Federal University of Bahia (NEIM) in Brazil. Finally, from the Middle East/Asia Minor the partners include AiW and Özyeğin University in Türkiye.

### Program Strands

The program’s strategy for countering anti-gender backlash through the three areas listed above, involved organising into three intertwined “strands” of work: Patriarchy (focusing on the roles of men, masculinities and patriarchy in backlash and resistance); Policy and Practice (focusing on power dynamics of gender justice in development policy and practice); and Voice (focusing on feminist movements for gender justice). While some partners work with one strand, some work with two and AiW works with all three. The strands are described below.

#### Patriarchy

Building on Susan Faludi’s (1991) early concept of patriarchal backlash, the Patriarchy strand focuses centrally on understanding patriarchal power brokers, other actors and ideals of masculinity in backlash politics – i.e., who and what is driving backlash – as well as how gendered power dynamics function within it. We also focus on what this implies for men as allies of women’s and other movements working for gender equality and broader social justice, who aim to resist backlash. As partners, we come to this through pro-/feminist perspectives from critical studies on masculinities, intersectionality and power analysis. Six Patriarchy strand partners – ADSOCK, AiW, BRAC-JPGSPH, CHSJ/SAHAYOG, Özyeğin and RLP – take different approaches to exploring these topics; some lean toward more traditional research with community members and stakeholders as well as discourse analysis of texts and language, whilst others deploy action research alongside groups and movements for creating dialogues and reflective learning to strengthen their strategies, or/and engage with service providers, duty bearers and other stakeholders to influence policy and practice.

In addition to actors, the patriarchy strand aims to identify dynamics and drivers of backlash, as well as documenting examples of effective resistance and response highlighting men’s negative and positive roles – with a critical eye on the role of patriarchal power dynamics. We explore how programs often stereotype women and men in blunt binary terms (as victims without agency and as perpetrators or protectors, respectively), and the counterproductive – often discriminatory – fall-out of such binary gender stereotyping within policy and advocacy.

Through literature reviews and debates across partners, and with others in the program and beyond, the strand built a conceptual framing starting from a recognition that anti-feminist backlash (i) manifests variously depending on geography, (ii) is not a unified movement (its actors, drivers, and impacts are neither monolithic nor coherent), (iii) is not always explicitly “about gender,” and (iv) is much more than merely a responsive “reaction.” Yet, its dynamics are deeply gendered and patriarchal at a fundamental level, which demands a focus on masculinities to better understand it and its drivers, and for stronger resistance to counter it.

We understand backlash as typically emerging at times of apparent systemic crises through the exploitation of ontological angst, to divide constituencies and re/shape social orders into new or old patriarchal forms of oppression (Edström et al., 2024d). A convergence of (climate, economic, pandemic, political, security) crises, playing out over different time-horizons, creates volatility in social orders and is seen to threaten the reproduction of elite rule and capitalist growth. Perceived crises and ontological anxieties are exploited through divisive populist politics linked to identity by these actors, to stoke animosity, divide communities, and mobilize support for authoritarian solutions. Heightened affect plays a major role in this mobilization offline and online. Backlash therefore emerges organically as attempts by different interest groups to manage such crises through “spatial fixes” in three key symbolic sites: the body, the family, and the nation (Edström et al., 2024d). These sites form the key battleground for contestations in oppositional narratives and symbolic tropes:

- In the individual space of the “sexed body” (heteronormative, binary, reductive).
- In the privatised space of the “traditional family” (patriarchal, hierarchical, hallowed).
- In the bordered, ordered space of the “ethnic nation” (homogenising, excluding, othering).

The strand probes how masculinities are deployed (appealed to, governed, and exploited) in backlash narratives and politics; we explore the resonance of recurring types of actors and projects. Typical protagonists deploy familiar narrative tropes displaying commonalities and contradictions, including in their anti-foreign rhetoric despite their common transnational networking. We thus co-develop and draw on a thesis about the exploitation of angst and crises of masculinity amidst multiple crises – including in globalization itself – to re/shape social orders through a narrative and gendered re-fixing of the three sites, as described above.

We see backlash as unfolding through a range of typical groupings of (often powerful) actors coalescing organically in response to such intersecting crises, as they appear to threaten elite rule and their varied vested interests. Responding to a generalized sense of crises and fragility in current orders, different but resonantly distinct types of actors coalesce – in variously reactive, pre-emptive, proactive or opportunistic modes, or stances, vis-à-vis progress for gender equality. Examples of types of protagonists, their types of actions (not always reactive), and aims or motivations are provided in Table 1, below.

Table 1. Backlash framings by types of actions, aims, protagonists, and writers

Actions	Aims	Protagonists (examples)	Writers (examples)
Defensive reactions	Restorative/ reversal	Various men’s rights groups, illiberal civil society organisations (CSOs)/faith-based organisations (FBOs), online manosphere groups	Mansbridge and Shames (2008); Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman (2016)
Anticipative actions	Pre-emptive/ delay/cancel	Elites with broader interests in status quo and/or growing profits	Rowley (2020); Townsend-Bell (2020)
Proactive strategies	Revolution/ new future	Conservative/aspiring theorists, ethnonationalist, fascist/far-right	Graff, Kapur and Walters (2019); Fekete (2019)
Opportunistic convergence	Instrumental/ mobilization	Populist movements, authoritarian politicians, leaders	Paternotte and Kuhar (2017); Datta (2021); Denkovski, Bernarding and Lunz (2021)

Source: Edström (2024a, p. 73)

Note: Not all the authors cited use the term “backlash,” but they debate similar phenomena.

In aggregate, these backlash protagonists organically generate an emotively supercharged and divisive kind of patriarchal politics, portraying gender as an alien and dangerous ideology imported from elsewhere. Revealed through historically or mythologically resonant narratives and discourse, this patriarchal politics is simultaneously trans-locational and multidimensional – ideo-political, socio-cultural, material-economic, ethno-historical, and epistemological.

Reading patriarchy as multidimensional, an ethno-historical dimension of “Male Identification” helps us to interpret the role of “affective identification” in response to men’s challenged sense of identity and threatened “ontological security” (Giddens, 1991), focused on intersectionally discriminating ideals of masculinity, othering, and emasculating various minorities. We also look at an epistemological dimension of truth and knowledge, where this site-fixing of the body, family and nation naturalizes three reductive patriarchal principles of governance through a type of Foucauldian power-knowledge, binary, hierarchical, and categorical (or closed-systems) principles, respectively. New/old simpler masculinities are thus variously deployed by multiple typical actors at many levels to update patriarchal orders over time (Edström, 2024a; Edström et al., 2025).

### Policy and Practice

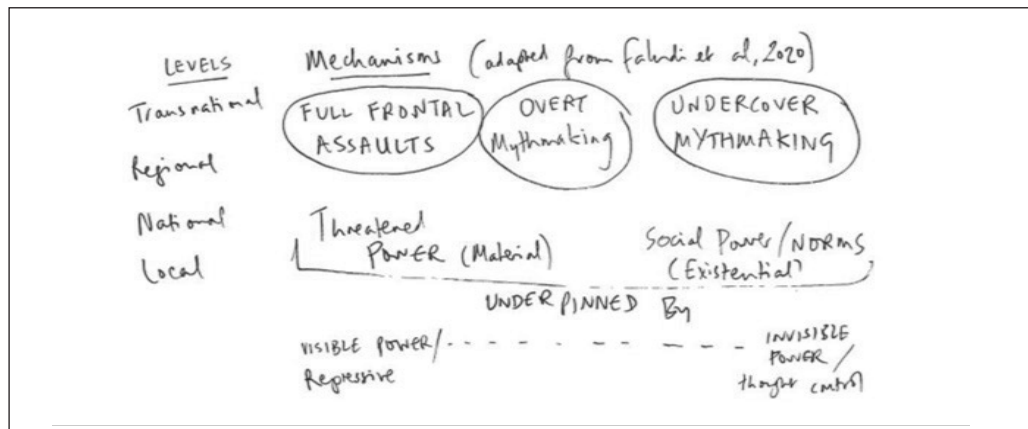
The Policy and Practice strand’s approach was iteratively co-constructed and developed with strand partners BIGD, Gender at Work, NEIM, AiW, and WOUUNET. We set up two mechanisms to access backlash data. One was a series of policy mappings updated annually in each country context, to map and analyze particular policy areas. The other was a counter backlash observatory process, to collect real time data on resistance strategies (counter backlash) across each of our country contexts. We also engaged a range of colleagues with specific expertise in commissioning a series of pieces including a paper on anti-LGBT law making (Judge, 2024) and philanthropy’s response to gender backlash (VeneKlasen, 2024).

This strand was founded on a conceptual framework underpinned by both power theory and queer theory. Power theory was used because we understood backlash to be driven by a feared loss of power, or the desire to gain power (Flood et al., 2021), and we wanted to

understand the visible, hidden, and invisible forms of power that backlash operates through, to help inform countering strategies. We also understood queer theory as crucial to understanding gender backlash because of the way in which it makes visible, and challenges, the gender binaries and heteronormativity reinscribed by backlash actors (Lewin, 2024). The diagram in Figure 1 below summarizes our initial understanding of gender backlash.

As described in Figure 1, we suggest that backlash operates at multiple levels (local, national, regional and transnational), and across a continuum of mechanisms, from full frontal assaults to undercover mythmaking. These reflect the type of power operating, from visible/repressive power to invisible power. It suggests that backlash is driven by threatened power – both material and existential (related to social norms).

Figure 1. Conceptual map of backlash and power in Policy and Practice



Source: Authors' own. Drawing by Lewin and McGee (2021)

Figure 2 provides a later iteration of this image based on evolving conversations about how to better articulate the spaces of backlash. These images illustrate our collective grappling with how to develop a shared framing for backlash across very diverse contexts, with very different conceptions of the relevant spaces or spheres of backlash politics; they also illustrate our “working out” rather than an arrival.

Figure 2. Alternative visualization of backlash from P&P strand workshop

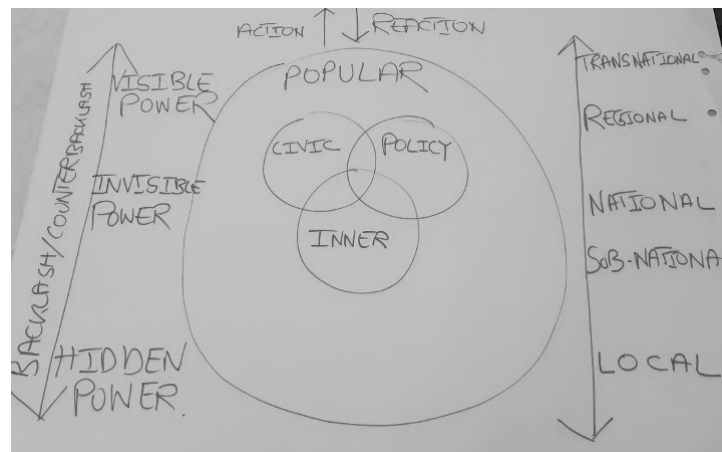


Photo credit: © T. Lewin (2023)

With regards to the policy mapping mechanism, to allow for some comparison across different partners, contexts, and activities in the strand, we defined a set of broad, shared questions on prioritized policy areas, which were as follows:

- What is happening in terms of full-frontal attacks, covert myth-making and overt mythmaking, in policy spaces, related civic space, popular space, and other spaces?
- What is happening to power (visible, hidden and invisible) within policy spaces, civic space, and popular space?
- Is the gender binary being reasserted here, and if so, how?
- How is morality linked to sexuality?
- What does your analysis of these dynamics tell us about how we should understand backlash? How is the erosion of gender justice agendas being addressed? And what are the opportunities for feminist action and impact, within a context of shrinking civic space?

Our emphasis was on the nature of power relationships and dynamics, and on how this affects the nature of spaces for engagement and contestations (i.e. spaces of “policy and practice”), more than on specific actors’ motivations and incentives.

We understand progressive social change, such as advancing gender equality, as a continuous power struggle; never static or guaranteed, and requiring constant effort to prevent regression. We defined backlash as intense attempts to reverse progress, more than just the usual ebb and flow of social attitudes. We emphasized the importance of understanding the spaces and levels within which backlash and counter-backlash play out – policy, civic, and popular spaces, and at transnational, regional, national, and local levels – as well as the strategies employed by backlash and counter-backlash actors, which we broadly outlined as discursive (framing, documentation), practical (protest, coalition-building), and legal (supporting progressive laws) (Lewin, 2021).

### Voice

The Voice strand focuses on placing voice at the centre of the analysis of strategies used by backlash actors and the ways feminist and queer activists counter these pushbacks. The strand explores how feminist and queer organizing has been affected by contemporary backlash in the Global South and how movements and activists are fighting back.

The strand researchers draw on a diverse range of literature social movement theory, feminist movement and gender and development literature, and writings on anti-gender backlash. The strand’s approach, frames and tools were co-constructed with strand partners – BIGD, Gender at Work, NEIM, AiW and CBR – and developed iteratively through multiple engagements over time.

The following key questions drive the strand’s work:

- In what ways has the current wave of backlash against gender equality affected feminist/queer voice (agenda and organising)?
- How are gender justice actors framing demands, building constituencies and alliances to amplify voice? What kinds of compromises are being made in this process?
- Under what conditions do gender justice actors have an impact (be heard; seen as legitimate claimants; heard in which space/site)? Where are the new energies?

From the start, we grappled with various conceptual and methodological challenges in defining, operationalizing, and categorizing backlash actions and counteractions by gender justice activists, and in how voice is connected to these actions. Our work adopted some working definitions of key concepts that are being interrogated – i.e., backlash, voice,

agency – and we agreed on some of the core assumptions that would be tested, adopting a common yet flexible approach, so all partners had a set of common parameters. Strand partners chose to explore these key questions by taking selected policy areas as entry points in their national contexts. These policy areas addressed one of these core issues: bodily autonomy, family law reforms, gender-based violence, and labor/citizenship rights.

Voice was defined as the ability to articulate one’s views, opinions, demands, ideas and claims (Nazneen & Sultan, 2014), and an expression of individual and collective agency to advocate for securing one’s interests. The analysis of voice considered the following: (a) performative aspects (how things are said); (b) substantive aspect (what is said); (c) location and temporality (when and where); (d) actors (by whom), and (e) that all these aspects of voice are gendered, informed by formal rules and social norms. Therefore, understanding gendered repertoires, including non-verbal expressions and silences, was important to capture agency, particularly in contexts where women, queer, and minority groups’ voices are already constrained in particular ways and backlash is acute.

As we used a movement-counter movement frame to investigate contestations over women’s and minority groups rights in the selected policy areas, it was important to trace how backlash actors used voice “to make contrary claims” to those espoused by feminist and queer rights groups (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). These claims, which are made with the specific aim to “downplay, delegitimize, and undermine established institutions and institutional norms” (Nazneen, 2024, p. 18), have an impact beyond the direct attacks (verbal, physical, on-line) against individual activists or groups.

One of the key strategies that backlash actors use in exercising their voice is through co-optation of gender equality, gender justice, and feminist and queer agendas through discourse capture (Lewin, 2021), that involves twisting and reinterpreting the language used by the feminist and queer movements. Similar to the Patriarchy strand’s view of backlash involving multiple sets of actors, the Voice strand researchers conceptualized that the aims of the various discursive strategies and how voice is deployed by actors vary.

These can aim to create a moral panic (Patternote & Kuhar, 2018; Mwiine & Ahikire, 2024; El Rahi & Antar, 2024) among the wider public about established heteronormative gender order, delegitimize claims made by women/queer rights groups (Flood et al., 2021), or try to re-traditionalize gender roles (Phillips, 2023; Mwiine & Ahikire, 2024). The impact these strategies have is that they silence feminist/queer voices, limit access to spaces and sites, and delegitimize their voice and agency.

Apart from direct attack and use of discursive strategies, backlash actors also engage in indirect ways to hollow out state institutions that protect rights of women and sexual minorities or hamper delivery of or implementation of services that address intersectional inequalities and gender bias. These strategies limit feminist and queer people’s voice, agendas, and organizing in specific ways. The indirect strategies are also closely connected to the erosion or roll-back of policies (Sultan & Mahpara, 2023; Chitagari & Kundu, 2024; Sardenberg et al., 2024). The following table shows the way the Voice strand has conceptualized the different strategies used by backlash actors, their manifestations, and their impact on feminist and queer activists’ agency and voice.

Table 2. Backlash strategies and their manifestations, and how they affect feminist/ queer voice

Backlash strategy	Manifestations	Example	Implications for feminist/ queer voice (agenda, ability to act)
Discursive strategies	Stigmatize/ vilify	Abortion rights activists are “baby killers”	Undermining legitimacy of activist’s voice
	Disavowal/ delegitimize claims	Poor women are lazy and do not deserve state assistance	Trivializing claims made
	Re-traditionalize gender roles	Only heterosexual marriage counts	Undermining legitimacy of alternative claims
	Pit one set of rights against another set of rights	The foetus’s right to life trumps mother’s health and choice	Co-opting rights language to pushback
Direct attacks/ overt strategies	Violence	Online threats, intimidation, physical attacks	Silencing of activists
	Dismantle gender equality programs/ institutions	Slash funds or close down units that address gender-based violence	Limiting sites of action for activists
	Use regressive laws to limit activism	Use security acts/ ICT laws to limit contestations	Silencing of/limiting sites of action for activists
Indirect strategies	Hollow out policy/ programs	Decriminalize domestic violence, remove gender equality elements from existing laws/ policy	Making claims made on state ineffective
	Deliberate inaction/ foot dragging by the state	Intentional non-implementation of laws/ policy	Claims on duty bearers becoming ineffective

Source: Nazneen (2024, p. 19)

As the cross-case comparative work of the strand progresses throughout the life course of the program, the voice strand researchers have grappled with how feminist and queer activists build collective agenda and voice to counter backlash. This involves raising, “negotiating, and legitimizing feminist and queer agendas” (Nazneen, 2024), and dealing with existing national, ethnic, racial, and gender narratives that may constrain such processes.

The cross-case comparisons examine how feminist and queer voice is exercised, amplified, and compromised in the act of countering. Which voices are heard in the process and represented with respect to setting agendas, what agendas are silenced, what compromises are made, and what trade-offs result from these compromises are queries requiring the strand researchers to consider how power operates along intersectional lines within feminist and queer rights movements, and the kinds of political opportunities that are available to effectively counter backlash. Addressing the above queries also means contextually

and historically grounding the analysis of backlash and counteractions and going beyond snapshots of contemporary contestations to capture the cyclical nature backlash. Emphasis on contexts also requires the strand researcher to rethink how political and collective agency is expressed in autocratic contexts with strong conservative culture and regressive gender norms – where the space for contestations may be very limited for women and queer rights groups – and to uncover the hidden and coded ways that gender justice actors express voice and political agency (Nazneen, 2023).

### How We Work

Partners in these strands, and indeed, the strands themselves, do not work in silos. As mentioned above, the strands intertwine and regularly come together to collaborate in developing theories, convening debates, and in discussing analysis, communications, and advocacy for influence. The program has also supported specific research projects outside of the strand structure and program partners, as well as across strands. In addition to work by and with direct long-term partners, the program also funded 12 seed grants for short-term research in India, Serbia, Pakistan and Türkiye. Whilst a complex program on the surface, it was designed and implemented to be flexible and adaptive throughout. As an example, our earlier seed-grantee in Türkiye, Özyeğin University, progressed to join our collective as a partner of the Patriarchy strand, while another organization, WOUNGNET in Uganda, joined the Policy and Practice strand well into the program timeline.

### Research, Theory, and Capacity Strengthening

Methods for strand research have included literature reviews, mapping policies and tracking processes, primary research on contextualized problems, comparative analysis, and action research by partners in different countries and contexts of anti-gender backlash. In addition, the program has included a focus on analyzing online gender backlash against feminist and queer activists in the Global South, particularly in areas where it has not been previously studied – across all strands. Led by an IDS expert in digital development, and starting with an in-house literature review, a pilot program of work was put together for developing skills and supporting research with/by interested program partners, based on a recognition of the gendered interaction between online discourse and actors' online behavior, with structural features of the digital economy rooted in broader patriarchal dynamics (Faith, 2022).

The online and digital spheres have long been utilized by feminists to organise and reach global audiences, particularly through social media platforms like Facebook and X. However, backlash actors have flooded online spaces; direct flurries of attacks, hate, and misinformation against feminists and queer rights activists have increased significantly. Seymour (2019, p. 20) argues that “the spontaneous ideology of trolling is masculinist” and that from “ISIS to the alt-right, new fascisms are emerging around microcelebrities, mini-patriarchs and the flow of homogenized messages,” adding that today’s “neo-fascism harvests the algorithmic accumulation of sentiment in the form of identification-by-Twitterstorm” (Seymour, 2019, p. 191).

Social media platforms are weak – if not purposefully negligent – in enforcing community guidelines that they have published, or to act against perpetrators (Antara et al., 2025; Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2025; Faith, 2022; Walther, 2022). In some cases, social media platforms have amplified hateful and violent content (Regehr et al., 2024), and major platforms are themselves digitally turbo-charging the emotional fervor and affective force of backlash movements, as the very “business model of the platforms presupposes... [both] ... individual misery... [and] ...a society reliably in crisis” (Seymour, 2019, p. 171). This work across strands is further described in the section on lessons below.

Capacity strengthening and methods development were also part of our co-created research and convening approach. We have done this by developing tools and methods for tracking and tackling backlash together with research activists and practitioners, complemented with outreach to different audiences through meetings, seminars, webinars and e-discussions. Partners have developed toolkits on backlash – for working with community groups and men in Kenya (ADSOCK, 2021), or with stakeholders in women’s participation in Lebanese politics (El Rahi et al., 2025), for online safety in Bangladesh (Antara et al., 2024), for documenting stories of marginalized groups (Gender at Work Consulting India, 2023), or compiling collections of tools and lessons across partners (Greig et al., 2025).

Aimed at different audiences of civil society actors, researchers, students, and policy makers, tools such as “Chess for Countering Backlash” (Edström, 2024b) and “Cards against Backlash” (Faith et al., 2024) are at the same time pedagogical and analytical, as well as enabling strategy building. For example, the Chess game was conceptualized building on the Patriarchy strand’s theoretical framing, and the tool was tested with BRAC-JPGSPH in Dhaka in 2022 and during the conference on “Cross-Regional Dialogues on Countering Backlash” at AiW in Beirut in 2023, as seen in Figure 3, below. Tables were divided into subregions, or countries, and findings discussed and compared across tables in plenary.

Figure 3. Testing Chess/Chaturanga/Shatranj on backlash at conference, Beirut 2023



Photo credit: © J. Edström (2023)

### Communications for Influence

Partners’ and IDS’ capacities to conduct research, develop methods and train others have improved through co-learning and collaboration in the program, as have our collective strategies for communication and “spreading the word.” Our grouping of partners and locations has provided strategic opportunities to leverage capacity strengthening to local and regional WROs and gender justice researchers and activists, with additional benefits of hosting regional workshops and international meetings and workshops for exchanging lessons and findings.

From inception, we developed our communications strategy with partners (including establishing a cross-partner comms working group) for sharing and communicating South-

ern perspectives globally. A good example of how this is done, is our special issue *IDS Bulletin* entitled *Understanding Gender Backlash: Southern Perspectives* (2024). This significant collection of research and analysis from the program and its partners was downloaded 15,500 times within its first year of publication. It presents an array of research and analysis from Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Lebanon, Kenya, and Uganda, and contributes to an improved understanding of gender backlash in these regions and across the Global South, and to a “more granular and multi-perspectival understanding of backlash” (Edström et al., 2024c). The collection allowed us to showcase partners’ early research in global fora such as at the UN CSW and the AWID Forum in 2024.

To complement the publication of reports, articles, and special issues, or the presentation of findings at conferences or events, we also leverage global networks, peer organizations, and policymakers for broadening debates and capacity building, such as hosting an informal and international cross-sectoral group, a “Coalition for Gender Justice.” Facilitating strategic dialogues with engaged policy makers, civil society platforms, networks, and other researchers has also helped us to leverage findings and communication outputs on backlash and the erosion of gender agendas within international policy spaces.

### **Convening Debates**

Convening debates is a central method in how we work across research and theory building, capacity strengthening, and communications for influence. This involves convening over time in evolving trajectories of different kinds of conversations and groupings coming together at strategic points. For example, in addition to frequently meeting online, strand partners have come together in-person through strand-convened workshops (e.g. in Nairobi 2022, Jinja 2022, Beirut 2023, and Bangkok 2024), as well as in cross-strand events (Brighton 2020 and Jinja 2022) and conferences (in Beirut 2023 and online 2025).

In 2023, AiW, with IDS under *Countering Backlash*, co-hosted the international conference called “Anti-feminist backlash in the Global South,” to share, produce and build knowledge on anti-gender backlash. Over 60 representatives attended, from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women’s rights organisations (WROs), donors, research institutes, universities and the media, from across the region and beyond – including many from program partner organizations from different strands (*Countering Backlash*, 2023).

This conference convening, as with others organized and co-hosted by the program, comes within the landscape of gender backlash and national, regional, and global crises. The AiW conference was hosted in the fallout of an economic crisis in Lebanon, triggered by a liquidity crisis in late 2019 and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the horrific so-called “Beirut Blast” in 2020, in which an explosion at the Port of Beirut led to the death of over 200 people, and an estimated displacement of 300,000 people (Leduc, 2020), further complicated by the broader economic downturn from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

### **Lessons Learned**

Throughout the lifecycle of the program, it was important to focus on building equitable partnerships that addressed unequal power relations and access to knowledge and resources that exist between the Global North and the South, including across knowledge ecosystems. This has meant building trust and rapport, as well as operating with feminist ethics and principles, which call for reflexive practices, acknowledging and addressing positional and locational power, privileging contextually grounded analysis, using innovative methods, and being adaptive to the changing needs to key stakeholders. We discuss some key lessons on this in separate subsections below.

### Being Flexible, Agile, and Adaptive

Coordinating a program based on principles of equitable partnership during a time of escalating crises – a global pandemic and post-pandemic economic precarity, multiple conflicts and increased autocratic rule and politics in many partner countries – meant working in creative and agile ways. The Covid-19 Pandemic and national lockdowns forced us to abandon earlier planned research visits and convening, and led to a rapid reframing of research methods and adapting to ways of working on-line. It meant grappling with inequities that exist between partner countries in terms of digital connectivity, pandemic preparedness, and partner institutions' capacities. This called for being flexible about internal delivery deadlines, building partner capacity in new ways, and negotiating with the funder to extend timelines to reduce pressures on work-life balance, at a time when everyone was struggling with extra care work.

The program kept an open feedback loop, using both formal mechanisms such as regular meetings and a mid-term review along with other more informal processes that allowed us to spot difficulties early and address challenges creatively. The flexibility built into our way of working has allowed partners to adapt their research and approaches in contexts where, for example, regressive government policies have impacted and restricted space for civil society organizations to operate safely, and to enhance the safety of individuals and groups. For example, partners in India and Bangladesh faced backlash themselves. In India, the new-fangled Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (government act to regulate foreign financing of CSOs) meant that funding could not be disbursed to one partner, which led to our finding a new way to continue supporting the local research colleagues. In Bangladesh, one partner came under attack through a vile social media campaign for their program work on trans-rights. This meant IDS had to engage social media platforms' protocol teams to ensure safety of individuals and to prevent the spread of harmful materials. It also meant changing tack and temporarily stepping back from publicly promoting their research.

### Reflective Learning from Contextually Grounded Analysis

The co-constructed nature of the program was operationalized through an iterative reflective process where strand partners came together to share their analysis, perspectives and experiences, which led to a critical and more nuanced understanding of backlash and the diverse ways in which backlash manifests across the Global South (Edström et al., 2024c). Collective reflection and learning processes highlighted how backlash actors are connected through different networks at the national and regional levels and how similar tactics and strategies were picked up by different sets of actors. For example, the resonant ways in which anti-homosexuality bills were shaped and pushed across East Africa (Otieno & Makabira, 2024) are further explained by how regional networks operate to roll back rights (Judge, 2024). These learning processes thus enabled partners to identify ways in which gender was used by authoritarian forces to mobilize support for their own agendas among various groups within their own contexts, and to spot similarities across otherwise very different countries. For example, the Muslim family law reforms in India and the debates on Personal Status laws in Lebanon were similarly used as rallying points for authoritarian forces to divert attention from broader inequities and to manage the different crises in their own settings (Edström et al., 2024c; Chigateri & Kundu, 2024; El Rahi, 2023). Reflection on such cases and resonance across contexts led to a questioning of how religion is used in politics, how this appears to be changing, and how it varies from the way "gender ideology" has been used in Latin America by right-wing populist forces.

Collective analysis processes also led the program to draw attention to the indirect forms of backlash in Global South contexts, which remain under-researched in main-

stream backlash literature. This form of backlash involves hollowing out expansive gender equality provisions in existing laws and policies and deliberate inaction by state officials and agencies to implement gender-positive changes (Nazneen, 2024). This can be seen in Bangladesh, in the intentional bureaucratic inaction by law enforcement officials to implement the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act (Sultan & Mahpara, 2023). In Brazil, the Maria da Penha Law (LMP), faced organised pushback from the ultra-neoliberal and neo-fascist government of Jair Bolsonaro that hollowed out structures that address gender-based violence (Sardenberg et al., 2024). Collective comparisons of such cases and findings allow for teasing out and better understanding how such mechanisms work in different settings.

### **Creating Space for Piloting Thematic Research on New and Thorny Issues**

Throughout Countering Backlash, space has been created for pilot studies to dig deeper into under-researched and thorny issues and to develop new areas of work. For example, as noted above, a pilot project – conceptualized and coordinated by an IDS Fellow on online gender backlash in the Global South (Faith, 2022) – engaged and trained partners across the strands, who then conducted different case studies and developed resources. As noted above, backlash actors are prevalent online and use hate speech, as well as misinformation and dis-information campaigns, to silence feminist and queer rights activists. Thus, partners in Lebanon, Brazil, and Bangladesh engaged with IDS in piloting research and analysis of online backlash in their contexts, while also developing safety toolkits for activists and providing training.

Besides capacity building of activists and convening dialogues, the research partners dug deeper into the dilemmas faced by feminist and queer activists in using digital safety laws (or ICT laws) to seek protection from state agencies, when these are the same laws used to repress rights activists in many settings. For example, partner research from Bangladesh shows that a digital security act and related policies are used to repress dissent, with only a small number of allies within the state willing to support online safety for all (Antara et al., 2025). The researchers raised questions about how realistic an ongoing strategic engagement may be with these allies, as gender backlash unfolds.

We also commissioned real-time data collection as pilots to capture on-the-ground contentions that could be shut down by the government at any point. For example, an IDS fellow worked with independent researchers on Shaheenbag protests in Delhi by Muslim women against the Citizenship Act proposed by the ruling party in India (Chopra, 2021). This act would have led to the disenfranchisement of a large section of minority groups and the protests were forcefully shut down. The research captured diverse strategies, including visual and performative acts by women to resist backlash and the role played of care in sustaining the movement (Chopra, 2021).

### **Methodological Innovations for Capacity Building**

The IDS work strand leads and partners developed a range of innovative methods over the lifecycle of the program, to capture diverse manifestations of gender backlash and counteractions by different feminist and queer rights groups.

For example, in the Voice strand, a set of gendered political economy analysis and participatory tools were developed to create: a) historical timelines that identify critical junctures; b) map actors who were for and against gender equality at the national level by placing them on different quarters of a quadrant; and c) map relationships and networks of the feminist coalitions and their opposition groups on specific issues.

These tools helped ground research in each context but also allowed strand partners to have common frames of reference. They also helped build analytical capacity of feminist coalitions and strand partners. In Uganda, the tools were used by the coalition that tabled the Sexual Offence Bill to question their own understanding of hidden power structures and oppositional strength (Mwiine & Ahikire, 2024). In Brazil, the student researchers applied and refined the tools and drew on the analysis generated by the program. The tools were also helpful for producing visual outputs that were used to comparatively analyze findings with all strand Partners (Sardenberg et al, 2024; Ahikire & Mwiine, 2024; Sultan et al., 2024).

The Patriarchy strand developed a tool for exploring how backlash actors shape narratives about the body, family, and nation, which was trailed at the AiW-hosted Beirut conference. Chess was adapted to examine the diversity of backlash actors in a given context and their discursive moves. Anti-gender forces are engaged in a range of political moves: reactive, pre-emptive, proactive or/and opportunistic. Typical backlash actors are exemplified in Figure 4, below.

Figure 4. Backlash chessmen

The chessmen can move up the territory/the board into sites on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd rows, the sites of body, family, and nation (respectively), where participants describe their typical discourse about each site. Discerning different types of actors and their discursive moves in the symbolic sites enables an analysis of the different political agendas at work. It can also clarify certain tensions among such agendas, as different types of actors' underlying interests do not always converge.



Source: Authors' own. Adapted from (Greig et al., 2025)

Exposing such tensions is an important strategy in countering backlash. It is also useful to reflect on the emotive power of backlash discourse to understand its contextual appeal. Anxiety may be a powerful affective force, but it is not the only one – positive and inclusive emotions, language, and stories can also be motivating and move people in a more hopeful and calmer direction. Along with other tools and lessons from partners, this is described in detail in the strands' resource book *Troubling Masculinities: Tools, Stories, Insights* (Greig et al., 2020).

The Policy and Practice strand introduced an Observatory initiative, to help us to frame, structure and systematize the gathering of data about counter-backlash dynamics of policy and practice, within the scope of partners' planned research, convening, dialogue and communications work, on all or some of the policy areas that each partner had already prioritized and mapped.

The core question we explored using the Observatory approach was:  
How do counter-backlash efforts to influence policy, build a movement and change narra-

tives and behaviors play out in policy space, civic space and popular space, either in relation to specific policy area(s) or in the country as a whole?

We held cross-program counter backlash observatory synthesis meetings to discuss development and findings across partners. This methodology was very varying received in different contexts, working very well in some, and not at all in others.

### Closing Thoughts

Convening and holding dialogues were critical to enhance our understanding of anti-feminist backlash across Southern contexts and for communicating with the broader world. Our emphasis throughout has been on creating a platform for partners' voice and for partners to have an equal say in how events were planned and convened. Most of these convenings (on or off-line) were either co-convened or co-hosted with partners or independently organized by partners. The AiW conference is one of these program milestones where the program partner (AiW) drove the conference planning process. The conference brought into dialogue the program's work with a broader regional audience and scholars working on backlash beyond the region.

As our work has unfolded and the contemporary tide of backlash (intertwined with broader geopolitics, as it is) has become clearer to us all over time, a constant feature of our context has been "crises." It is increasingly clear, in 2025, that backlash is far from a temporary aberration or blip, but we are also beginning to see how resistance and countering may be possible in different settings, and the need for more trans-national collaboration. We had planned to hold the final event in the program co-hosted with our partners in Türkiye, in Istanbul at the end of June, but in the very week before that, US President Donald Trump was threatening to join Israel in bombing neighbouring Iran (a threat which he indeed delivered on). So, in consultation with program partners and allies in the broader Coalition for Gender Justice, we chose to cancel that event (moving part of it online instead). This underlines how precious the conference in Beirut was in these troubled times, and how collective action, flexible collaboration and solidarity are all crucial for carrying our struggle forward. Backlash is not yet receding, but we are now better at reading the game and the "countering" has begun. The struggle continues.

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